

## Article

# A Cognitive Approach to Tantric Language

Sthaneshwar Timalina

Department of Religious Studies, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182-6062, USA; timalin@mail.sdsu.edu

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**Abstract:** By applying the contemporary theories of schema, metonymy, metaphor, and conceptual blending, I argue in this paper that salient cognitive categories facilitate a deeper analysis of Tantric language. Tantras use a wide range of symbolic language expressed in terms of *mantric* speech and visual *maṇḍalas*, and Tantric texts relate the process of deciphering meaning with the surge of mystical experience. In this essay, I will focus on some distinctive varieties of Tantric language with a conviction that select cognitive tools facilitate coherent reading of these expressions. Mystical language broadly utilizes images and metaphors. Deciphering Tantric language should therefore also provide a framework for reading other varieties of mystical expressions across cultures.

**Keywords:** Tantra; metaphor; metonymy; conceptual blending; image; schema; *mantra*; *maṇḍala*

## 1. Introduction to the Categories

This essay explores an interface between the domains of cognitive linguistics and Tantric traditions. The specific concepts I have borrowed from the field of cognitive studies involve the concepts of schema, metonymy, and metaphor, and the theory of cognitive blending. The objective is to decipher Tantric language, both its visual and speech expressions, with the aid of the basic cognitive devices. I am using Tantra very broadly here, as any text or practice that shares some of the common elements of Tantra, such as *mantra*, *maṇḍala*, visualization, or an installation of the syllables (*nyāsa*) fall under this category. Those interested in defining Tantra can consult White ([1], p. 9). Tantric texts and practices focus on transforming experience from commonsense to mystical, although the category of “mystical” needs to be read as translating Tantric esoteric experiences. Unfortunately, “mystical” itself is a loose category. Contemporary scholarship has a substantial amount of conversation regarding this category, including the cognitive approach to comprehend what has been culturally identified as mystical [2–6]. Broadly, any alternate state of experience, hazy consciousness, experiences that involve the sacred, experience of pure consciousness or luminosity, along with the literary texts and devices that relate to these experiences either to capture, hone, rectify, or elaborate upon these experiences relate to the domain of the mystical, and any discipline that comes out of this conversation or the experiences that are institutionalized through these conversations fall under the domain of mysticism. Most cultures share something that paves the path to an alternate state of experience and most cultures assign this experience as relating to the sacred. In general, Tantric language can be considered a subset of mystical language, and the approach of reading archaic forms of expression, common to Tantric tradition, can pave the path of reading any other mystical literature. Most Tantras address some esoteric states of experience and provide a pathway to acquire these experiences by means of visualizing various geometric designs called *maṇḍalas*, or by articulating or visualizing the phonemes that possess assigned additional power exceeding the mere semantic power of references called *mantras*, or by activating both the domains of sound and vision through the practice of *mantra* and *maṇḍala* simultaneously. This is exactly where the subset of mystical language, the language of images, and phonemes with extra-semantic power come into play. In this essay, I will focus on some distinctive varieties of Tantric

language with a conviction that select cognitive tools facilitate coherent reading of these expressions. Mystical language broadly utilizes images and metaphors. Deciphering Tantric language should therefore also provide a framework for reading other varieties of mystical expressions across cultures.

The approach of reading Tantric literature through the lens of cognitive science is not new. My own studies have been greatly inspired by the works of Glen Alexander Hayes. Hayes [7] addresses schemas in light of Tantric *sādhana* with a focus on Vaisnava Sahajīya texts, while my own focus lies on classical Sanskrit texts on the tradition of Śrīvidyā and Kālī traditions. With the same focus on Vaisnava Sahajīyā and Tantric literature, Hayes has sought to unravel the mystical language in light of contemporary metaphor theory [8–10]. I have found this work insightful, not only to read classical Tantric texts, but also to decompress meaning that lies beneath mantric language and to unravel the metaphoric language of Tantric visualization. Among the cognitive tools, metonymy is slowly gaining in prominence, as this device appears to be even more universal than thinking through metaphors, and keeping this in mind, I have explored the metonymic domain of Tantric language. Hayes has also explored the theory of cognitive blending in order to shed light in mystical Tantric language [11]. While utilizing these concepts from cognitive theory, my own approach here is to identify metonymic and metaphoric structures in classical Tantric literature, and in particular, to engage the visual domain of Tantric language. In practice, Tantric culture is highly visual, with images at the center of everyday visualization. Both the public and private domains of Tantric life involve sequences of meticulous visualization and animation or bringing the imagery to life. Tantric language has proven enigmatic, and the scholars who have attempted to analyze Tantric language by a literal translation have done a great disservice to Tantra itself, as this approach violates the intent of both the texts and the tradition. By engaging cognitive devices in order to unravel the suggested meaning layered within Tantric symbolism, my expectation is to correct some of the grotesque misrepresentations of Tantric mystical language. This is by no means to reject the relevance of other approaches. I just simply fail to comprehend how, by understanding the practice of some esoteric circles sharing their mystical experience among select followers, can be generalized to make broad social claims. There was a time when people like Abbe Dubois could enchant the Western audience with the narratives of faraway lands. The social claims made, based on those who were outcasts by choice, the Tantric esoteric circles, can hardly shed light on those who are socially marginalized. This epistemic quagmire has led some of my colleagues to return to old school philology, as if reading the original texts in their original context can actually give us deeper insights. Tantric texts are opaque and can easily mislead even the adepts, forget about the Western audience that lacks social sensitivity and is unaware of linguistic and philosophical complexity. Moreover, this tendency fails to address the value of such endeavors: whatever efforts at interpretation are made bear no consequence for us, individually or collectively; those endeavors are meaningless and it is wise not to pursue those efforts, just like a buffoon striking water to inflict pain (*jalatāḍananyāya*). On the other hand, reading Tantric literature by applying cognitive theories has a meaningful role to play. This helps us use some devices that possess the methodology to unravel the layered meaning nesting beneath opaque practices and mystical texts. Moreover, this helps to globalize Tantric studies. Simply put, if there is anything valuable in these texts and traditions and if Tantric practices can serve humanity, the whole world deserves the benefits of such practices. In addition, if these claims are false, the world also deserves to make counter-arguments. My own efforts rest on the assumption that these texts and traditions have a wealth of materials to add to a meaningful global conversation.

Please allow me to introduce some of the categories essential to further our conversation. First, the schema. Schema is a mental framework, a way of organizing knowledge, a map for us to evaluate the situation and guide response. We anticipate a certain sequence of events in certain rituals, or expect someone to behave in a particular way. We respond to situations based on our own internalized frameworks or what we believe we are. Following Piaget [12], schema is “a cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning”. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have advanced some of the arguments in the study

of schemas [13,14]. Pertinent among them is the concept of “image schema” which stands for the structure of our cognitive process that helps us establish patterns of understanding and reasoning [15]. Broadly, image schema is a prelinguistic structure of experience that guides the process of mapping over domains in forming conceptual metaphors. There are three distinctive ways that the recognition of schemas helps us understand Tantric language: (i) Tantric images anticipate a particular narrative with defined roles given for the specific deities, and assigning meaning by use of conceptual metaphors and their decompression is possible as we recognize the schemas and how they operate as placeholders. When we see the image of Durgā, we see a goddess slaying a buffalo-demon. The narrative, found in the *Devīmāhātmya*, provides substance to the image by recounting the victory of the goddess over Mahiṣāsura. In some contexts, the texts themselves are visualized as images. The *Bhagavadgītā* or the *Prajñāpāramitā* are actual texts. Nevertheless, these are also visualized in some deity forms. By identifying the textual relation to the imagery, the viewer can make sense of what constitutes specific aspects of the imagery. Narratives with graphic and complex imagery, such as that of the blended image of Hari-Hara, where the deity image depicts Half Śiva and half Viṣṇu, or the image of Ardhanārīśvara, where Śiva and Śakti blend in a single body and constitute an imagery by borrowing aspects from both, are inconceivable without knowing the narratives that underlie these images; (ii) Tantric texts choose to remain obscure and intentionally use abstract metaphors. Recognizing their schematic patterns and textual interrelations helps us unravel the source of the metaphors. The same applies to other cognitive processes such as metonymic thinking or conceptual integration or blend. *Cidgaganacandrikā*, the text that I borrow examples from in this essay in the following pages, for instance, is inconceivable without the knowledge of the specific system, the mantras, deities, and *maṇḍalas*, associated with Kālī of the northern transmission. Tantric texts almost always use substitute words for each of the phonemes, and one unaware of the meticulous process of deciphering the mantras is out of luck to make sense of these opaque group of words; (iii) Above all, recognizing the schema in Tantric language allows us to make a meaningful conversation about the altered states of consciousness that are mapped in bodily language and the mystical and esoteric experiences are described in terms of orgasmic or other forms of somatic experiences. This is vivid in the discourse on the surge of Kuṇḍalinī. Top-down metaphors classify the surging experiences and map them in the language of a physical journey of the serpentine force. The flow of *prāṇa* is expressed in the language of the blossoming and closing of the lotus petals. Moreover, the divine body is mapped onto the body of the aspirant, and this in turn is transformed into some geometric designs and phonetic configurations. Deities portray graphic emotions, mostly of rage and lust. Transformed and altered experiences, in these systems, are mapped within the body, and some insights from the contemporary discourse on body schema further ground this esoteric discourse. This goes without saying now that engaging cognitive linguistic devices in unraveling the Tantric esoteric language does not reduce Tantra or its experiences, but only aids in a common sense understanding of this otherwise opaque discourse.

Schemas help us understand metonymy and metaphors, two of the prominent cognitive categories that the Tantric exegetes applied in advancing their semiotics. Although the role of metaphor has been recognized since the ancient times, Lakoff and Johnson [16] have made it clear that these structures are some of the most prominent among our cognitive mechanisms that help us relate or “map” one concept with another and are thus fundamental to conceptualization itself. As Hayes [7] has pointed out, understanding body schemas allows us to map Tantric mystical language. For a broader conversation on body schema, Shaun Gallagher [17] has made some insightful arguments. In my own reading, body schemas construct and apply to both Tantric cosmology and visualization. Even the Tantric ritual of installing the seed syllables in the body called *nyāsa* rests on mapping cosmic planes within the body and recognizing Tantric principles in relation to the body schemas. The *Nyāsa* rituals generally involve invoking some phonemes and touching the limbs of the body, metaphorically installing them within the aspirant’s body. In this ritual process, these phonemes are mapped with the body of the deity and function as the device to transform aspirant’s body into the divine one. A transformed or altered state of experience is the anticipated result of this installation ritual. The most common *nyāsa* ritual involves

installing the syllables in five fingers and the palm, and select corporeal limbs such as heart, head, tuft (*śikhā*), chest, eyes and the surrounding area. Deity mantras are generally broken into five parts, and the collective mantra and those five parts are distributed accordingly throughout the body of the aspirant in order to “make” one’s body divine.

In metonymic thinking, certain acts are represented instead of the person doing the act, the place for the event, and so on. By means of this mechanism, some subcategories or members or sub-models stand for the entire category and can be used to comprehend the category as a whole [15]. This something (A) standing for something else (B), as Lakoff and Johnson [18] have pointed out, is one of the most common cognitive traits that facilitate the organization of our thoughts, and is common across cultures. When something (A) stands for something else (B), A is identified as the source and B as the target. To reiterate, metonymy is a conceptual mapping within a domain that involves a “stands-for” relationship between the source and target domains and is used primarily for reference ([19], p. 103)<sup>1</sup>. Readers may find Patton’s [21] conversation on Sanskrit and Vedas also relevant for understanding this philosophical discourse on metonymy.

Broadly speaking, metaphor is based on similarity whereas metonymy relies on contiguity, and metaphor offers alternative conceptualizations for the same phenomenon while metonymy links phenomena to each other. The difference between metonymy and metaphor is maintained on the ground that metonymy is a single domain mechanism whereas metaphor relies on two distinct source and target domains. In metaphor, we can have multiple mappings between two domains, whereas in the case of metonymy, we can have only one relation. In metaphor, the relation is “target is source,” whereas metonymy can be characterized as “source for target”. Following the structuralists, metaphor is associated with the principles of selection and substitution, whereas metonymy is linked with the principles of combination and contexture [22]. Conventional metaphors and metonymies reveal an automatic connection between two conceptual structures. The metaphors and metonymies that are commonly grasped and expressed in communication are often particular manifestations of a more abstract superordinate metaphor and metonymy that are, to a large extent, culturally-specific and “contingent” in that the source and target relation is not necessary ([23], pp. 64–96).

A literal reading of the Visual Tantra leads nowhere. The goddess Lakṣmī carries a snake, a phallus, and a vagina on her crown. Goddess Guhyakālī carries ten Mahāvidyā deities in her arms as ten weapons. Kālī sits atop Mahākāla, the Lord of time and death. Kāmākālā dances atop a crescent moon. Many gods come with one thousand arms, with each carrying specific weapons and displaying particular gestures. Most deities have three eyes, while others come with multiple heads. To make it even more perplexing, each of the heads is associated with a different deity. In contrast to these perplexities, when we apply the framework of metonymy and metaphor, a fluid transaction among ritual, text, and imagery occurs, and the images express what has been institutionally retained behind the articulated language. For the purpose of applying the devices of metonymy and metaphor, I am using the generally outlined parameters of metonymy and metaphor, where metaphors are used for substitution and metonymy for association; metaphors act by suppressing ideas whereas metonymy acts by combining ideas; in metaphor, comparison is based on similarity whereas in metonymy comparison is based on contiguity. “He is a tiger” is a metaphoric use; “I am being trained by a tiger” is a metonymic application. The same weapons and gestures can be used as metaphors or metonymies at different times, and only the texts and the rituals can determine the actual scope of its application. Where the texts portray Durgā riding a tiger, the tiger expresses valor, and the corpse that Cāmuṇḍā rides represents death. When transformed into visual language, there is no longer a corpse standing for something else, as an actual corpse is depicted in the imagery. All the artistic expressions borrow nuances of metaphor and metonymy. The only addition in Tantric visualization is that there is a ritual

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have found this position problematic. For discussion, see Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, F.J. and L. Pérez Hernández ([20], pp. 321–57).

practice and textual tradition as the foundation. This gives the much-needed boundary to deciphering the visual language.

One additional category from the cognitive domain is the concept of blending. Fauconnier and Turner have championed the theory of “conceptual blending” as a general theory of cognition, following which we are cognitively wired to blend ideas from different domains to construct new concepts and this process is common to all the domains of human cognition. In metonymic thinking, something A has a surplus of meaning. In metaphoric thinking, the significance of something from source A is projected onto something else, B. In the case of conceptual blending, select aspects are borrowed from both domains and projected onto an emergent structure, a blend. For a reader new to this application, Turner’s *The Origin of Ideas* [24] is a good text that explicates the concept of blending. In this text, Turner makes some far-reaching arguments that are pivotal to understand some of the key conversations in this paper. For example, Turner says that our ability to develop and use new ideas come from our ability to blend or integrate the pre-existing existing ideas [2,24]; blending is a universal cognitive phenomenon [3,24]; this blending of different ideas into one happens in the mental space [4,5,24]; we compress ideas to think about larger mental webs [9,24]; or imagination is an essential cognitive mechanism for blending [17,18,24]. While the concept of “blend” is unique to these cognitive linguists, this framework finds precedent in classical Sanskrit philosophy and the classical discourse on literary tropes, and the designative power of language helps us bridge the two domains of classical Sanskrit philosophy and modern cognitive linguistics. While Turner uses examples such as “I am a tiger” [12,24] or “lion-man” [13,24] to demonstrate what a “blend” is, these same examples appear in the aesthetic context of Sanskrit texts, for example, “*siṃho māṇavakaḥ*” or “*narasiṃha*”, and I see no reason that precludes a global approach to discuss these identical issues.

I am not alone in making this argument [25]. What is unique to understanding Tantric visual language, though, is the application of these concepts to unraveling the significance of blended images, such as that of Narasiṃha. In addition, this is just one experiment. The scope of this approach is not reserved to Tantric language alone. Whether we are interested in understanding Egyptian blended imagery or Aztec visual culture, whether our approach is to understand the blended images from China or from Africa, conceptual blending is an essential tool to excavate the meaning embedded within these images. Some of my colleagues have expressed that I must be maintaining the most radical form of reductionism in order to apply the framework of blending. I beg to differ. Classical Sanskrit literature has abundant discourse on *abhīhitānvaya* or syntactic reductionism and *anvītabhidhāna* or syntactic holism, and neither of these positions led these philosophers to surrender to absolute reductionism. I would have to deviate from the main discourse, if I were to shape the trajectory of this discourse about the possibility of applying the concept of “blend” without maintaining radical materialism.

Moving back to our original thread, I have pointed out earlier the significance of the schema. We can have schemas for everything, for our own subjective states, for the roles that we play in different times and places, for events or functions, for specific individual or even for collective actions. In conceptual blending, we borrow the inputs from two different domains and create a new one, an emergent structure. In counterfactual reasoning, we find ourselves in a hypothetical scenario, and when we voyage back to our real personality, we assume a certain degree of access to the counterfactual scenario. This could not have been possible without conceptual blending. Following this theory, the “blend” is the fourth mental space wherein two different spaces are mapped in the generic space (third space), and an emergent structure rises in the mind, one that was not existent in the inputs. In this way, when our mind integrates various concepts, we are establishing new mental spaces, analyzing similarities and differences across spaces, projecting particular aspects from different inputs to a blend, and carrying out various operations in the blend, constantly giving rise to new structures.

Fauconnier and Turner [23] introduce four types of networks to describe the specific cognitive mechanism: simplex, mirror, single-scope, and double-scope. When two entities are linked with each other, the relation is made through the simplex network. Relating two entities requires an additional cognitive process besides simply knowing two discrete entities. A mirror network describes a more

complex cognitive process. In this, both input spaces share the same organizing frame, and this frame is also shared by the blend<sup>2</sup>. When one single agent is depicted performing multiple tasks in the blended space, this reflects the mirror network. Here, different inputs mingle and do not represent a clash. However, when this is not the case, the integration network becomes even more complex. The single-scope network consists of the blend where the inputs from one organizing frame are projected onto another ([23], pp. 126–27). This type of projection is common to source-target metaphors where distinct properties inherent to A are projected onto B, and due to the clash resulting from the imposition of characteristics from source to target, one thing provides insight to the other. In the case of the double-scope network, there are different organizing frames where the emergent structure borrows elements from different inputs. However, what sustains this network is the clash between the given inputs. In a complex structure, the mechanism of “megablend” depicts the structure where one pre-existing blended space merges with another input (which in itself can be a blended space) and gives rise to a new blend. This mechanism of blending more than two inputs is also found in our everyday language ([23], pp. 279–308). Blending various images is quite common in Photoshop. The analysis of various Tantric images demonstrates that Tantrics exploit innumerable possibilities in creatively giving rise to different conceptual structures.

While this discussion is sufficient for a basic introduction to the application of these conceptual categories to decipher Tantric language, the most recurring type of blend in visual Tantra is that of mega-blend or what Turner identifies as hyper-blend. When we borrow two select elements from two different sources and create a new idea, we have a blend. These blends, however, are not the final products. Any blend can be the source for the future blends. A new emergent structure can borrow either from two pre-existing blends or from a blend and a simple network. In addition, this new structure can be the source for further blending, *ad infinitum*. Let me focus one simple image for explaining this concept (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Durgā Mahiṣāsūramardinī.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most cited examples of mirror networks is the riddle of the monk occupying a place in the path at the same hour of two different days, where he climbs the mountain one day and climbs back the other day [26].

Demon Mahiṣa stands for lust and rage. The Goddess Durgā kills the demon, and so she stands for virtue. The demon also stands for tyranny. The goddess, in slaying the demon, liberates the gods in exile. The demon is often depicted as buffalo-man, with a human head and a buffalo body, and thus reflects the tension between human rationality and animal instincts. As identified above, the demon already is a blend of different inputs, and the image depicting the deity slaying the demon further blends the inputs. The goddess rides on a tiger, which represents valor. The Tantric significance goes deeper than this apparent symbolism though. One of the Sanskrit terms for tiger is *pañcāśya*, or “five-faces”. Most Tantric goddesses are seated atop Sadāśiva, a deity with five faces. In her Durgā iteration, the image of Sadāśiva is substituted with a tiger. Sadāśiva is already a philosophically laden concept, with it depicting the harmony of the epistemic modes of awareness reflected within and thus referring to the ego and awareness facing outward, with the other coming to the realm of awareness. The goddess has eighteen arms, while there are many other images with different number of arms. She carries weapons in each of her arms and these weapons are borrowed from different gods. These weapons metonymically represent those gods. The goddess herself is an integral force of all the male gods, as the *Devīmāhātmya* suggests. Gods, defeated by the demon and unable to defeat with their distributed force, concentrate their energy in a single focal point and the goddess Durgā emerges as the distilled energy of this burning flame of power. She therefore stands for the unity of all powers, and the goddess describes the whole as well as its components. Each of the deities that offered weapons to the goddess in themselves borrow multiple nuances from the Vedic and Tantric symbolism and each therefore already represents a mega-blend. The image of Durgā, however, is not one of the most complex images in Tantras.

## 2. Applications

### 2.1. Tantric Language I: Seed Syllables (*Bīja Mantras*)

The above conversation has brought to light the concepts of the schema, metonymy, metaphor, and conceptual blending. In developing Tantric language, one or many of these processes are applied at the same time. The most basic phonetic symbols that are uniquely Tantric are identified as “seed syllables” (*bīja mantras*). These are single syllable mantras such as *om*, *aiṃ*, *hrīm*, *klīm*, *śrīm*, *hsaum*, *shaum*, etc. Complex mantras with multiple phonemes are considered in Tantras as the corporeal expression of the seed syllables which are also often invoked as the heart of the deity. In Tantric visualization, the deity image is considered to be the manifest body of the seed syllable. In the case of seed syllables, every phoneme has a separate name and Tantric texts adopt methods of encoding and decoding to actualize the mantra embedded within a text. A text can suggest *viyat* = sky, long vowel *ī*, *vītilotra* = fire, *ardhendu* = crescent moon. In this encoding, the term sky stands for the phoneme “h”, another level of encoding that rests on Tantric metaphysics that considers the phoneme “h” to have the elemental property of the sky. In the same way, the term “fire” signifies the phoneme “r”. Collectively, the text identifies the single seed syllable “*hrīm*”, suggesting the elements that the *bīja* embodies. Following Tantric metaphysics, the fifty Sanskrit phonemes are identified as the Mātrkāś which are segmented into eight groups with each corresponding to specific cosmic functions. This identification itself evokes various cognitive frameworks. First of all, eight mother goddesses represent the conglomerate of the mother divinities worshipped in proto-Tantric culture, and Tantra incorporates these deities and their nuances in a new, graphic iconography. A similar schematic transfer also occurs with the *mantras*. Sanskrit phonemes, mostly identified as fifty, although varying in number to sixty-four, are likewise identified as the mother goddesses and governing divinities. In this depiction, *saṃvitti* or consciousness manifest in the form of concepts are conditioned by words which are determined by the phonemes. Since in this paradigm consciousness is the very divinity, the frame for the consciousness to manifest itself as concepts, aided by words, is in itself the expression of the divinity. As a consequence, phonemes are the “divine mothers” that provide the platform for consciousness to express itself. By borrowing two schemas, one, the order of syllables and the

other, the mother goddesses, Tantras devise a new language of *mantras*. In the example of the seed syllable *hrīm*, the source, crescent moon, metonymically stands for the phoneme “*m*”, for it is spelled in some of the Indo-Aryan scripts as a crescent moon. Sky and fire stand for the phonemes “*h*” and “*r*” because these are the symbolic character for the elements, and this symbolism relies on some other metaphysical analysis of the phonemes and their function in Tantric rituals to evoke specific elements. Tantric rituals are both group-oriented and thus public, and individually enacted in private. Some can be internal, meaning that all the rituals are carried out by a mere visualization or imagination of what would otherwise be an external ritual, or the external ritual that involves offerings of real objects and libation. Most Tantric rituals involve *antaryāga*, or an inner libation. This is performed even in the case of external worship. These rituals involve invoking the elements, such as sky or fire, by a mere articulation of the phonemes such as /*h*/ or /*r*/. In this conceptual mapping, the phonemes transform the subject’s experience to encountering the elements. One commonly studied ritual is that of elemental purification (*bhūtaśuddhi*) ([27], pp. 108–13). A complex cognitive mechanism is at play even in this elementary form of Tantric ritual. Most contextual is the correlation between the phonemes and the cosmic elements. A broader schematic configuration evokes the identity between the aspirant’s body and the cosmos. In addition, the purification of the elements within the body stands both for the individual’s physical purity as well as the purity of the external or physical elements. Imagination is central to ritual visualization. The correspondence between the phonemes and the elements is arbitrary, as the same elements can refer to some other phonemes in other contexts, and what determines the significance is the ritual context. The seed syllable *hrīm* is assigned for *kuṇḍalinī* the serpentine power, the divine Śakti, the emotional expression of modesty, among many other things, representing a further assimilation of the domains borrowed from different Tantric paradigms<sup>3</sup>.

“*Aham*” is a phonetic acronym that stands for multiple references. Acronymically, this stands for the entire Sanskrit alphabet, starting from the first alphabet “*a*” to the final letter, “*h*”. As a word, *aham* stands for “*I*” or “*I am*”. Abhinava Gupta elaborates upon the deeper significance of this acronym “*aham*”, highlighting its phonetic, cosmic, and somatic correspondence [28]. Following Abhinava, there are sixteen different ways of deciphering this word, with it referring to the cosmic principles, embodied self, the divinity in the mother and father principles as Śiva and Śakti, and by the same token, the two intricate domains of consciousness as illumination (*prakāśa*) and reflection (*vimarśa*). Rather than creating a direct correspondence to the meaning domain, Tantras stress the phonemes themselves, considering them as the divine Mātṛkās, and the acronym *aham* stands for this binary symbolism. *Aham*, as an emergent structure, becomes a unique form that integrates properties borrowed from the two sources, expressed in terms of Śiva and Śakti. On one hand, *aham* is just an integration of the first and last phonemes in Sanskrit. However, this is not just an acronym but a word which means “*I*”. This interplay of common language with phonetic symbolism allows Abhinava to expand upon the concept by identifying the mother and father categories. Just as the body is an integral form of mother and father elements, so also is subjective experience and integration of the revealing or illuminating domain of consciousness identified as *prakāśa* and the reflexive domain of consciousness identified by *vimarśa*. A singular “*I*” awareness thus stands for both the cognitive and recognizing roles of consciousness.

“*Sa*” and “*ha*” are two natural sounds that occur with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. The soothing experience of breath filling the lungs is mapped with the soothing experience of gazing on the full moon. In the corporeal sense, “*sa*” and “*ha*” are properly expressed in a sigh of relief. Regular breathing, if observed closely does have some articulation of “*sa*” and “*ha*.” Because the

<sup>3</sup> At this juncture, I must clarify that my use of ‘schema’ is not always restricted to a pre-noetic ‘body schema’ as has been used by Gallagher. When addressing Tantric visualization, I do indeed apply the term in this sense. I do, however, use it for a representation of a plan or theory in the form of a model. In this way, certain concepts or overarching philosophies are used as schema in deciphering Tantric symbolism. *Mātṛkā*, for example, functions as a schema. The framework of *Mātṛkā* helps us organize the deity concepts, phonetic representation, spatial extension in eight directions, and so on.

sound “sa” evokes the experience of gazing on the moon, the phoneme “sa” refers to the moon. It is a commonsense understanding that gazing on the full moon can be soothing. By evoking multiple domains, where in the first relation the moon stands for the phoneme “sa” and the soothing experience is linked with the moon, we have a new correspondence of the phoneme “sa” standing for the soothing experience. The expression of “ha” is linked with exhaling, and by the same token, heating up the body, and because it is the sun that heats up the body, the phoneme “ha” stands for the sun. When these two phonemes are placed in sequence with other seed *mantras* such as “Om̐” (which in itself is a compressed seed syllable with Tantric significance in multiple domains), we arrive at the construction of esoteric seed syllables like *shaum̐*, *hsaum̐*, and so on. The basic format for a single syllable corresponding to multiple categories resembles the way *Om̐* is used in the *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad* (MU) for describing different states of consciousness, different cosmic entities, and different states of subjectivity. The first two stanzas of MU are sufficient to describe this correlation:

“Om̐ —this whole world is that syllable! Here is a further explanation of it. The past, the present, and the future—all that is simply Om̐; and whatever else that is beyond the three times, that also is simply Om̐—for this *brahman* is the Whole. *Brahman* is this self (*ātman*); that [*brahman*] is this self (*ātman*) is consisting of four quarters.” ([29], p. 475).

The text then continues assigning the cosmic planes and psychological states to the specific phonemes of the syllable *Om̐*. Rather than saying “*Om̐*” means all of these, what matters to visualization is the correspondence of multiple domains with the basic phonemes wherein the subject reciting the *mantra* or seed syllable remembers or brings to his awareness all these different domains. Tantric visualization, accordingly, relates to the reactivation of this complex correspondence system.

## 2.2. Tantric Language II: Long Mantras

Long Tantric mantras often combine the seed syllables, the deity name or multiple names, and her roles as described in different narratives or magical rituals. A common Tantric mantra, “*om̐ aiṃ hr̥iṃ kl̥iṃ cāmuṇḍāyai vicce*”<sup>4</sup>, for example, combines multiple seed syllables, including the deity name. Every seed syllable has its own connotation that adopts multiple domains and creates a new structure by means of blending the syllables. On some occasions, the phonemes may simply be the acronyms of the deities’ names, for example, all the goddesses in the sequence of *Ḍākinī*, *Rākinī*, *Lākinī*, *Kākinī*, *Śākinī*, and *Hākinī* can be invoked by the seed syllable “*da-ra-la-ka-sa-ha*”<sup>5</sup>.

At least two domains are involved in creating phonetic symbolism. One, the phonemes have a designated order. Two, the deities represent cosmic principles, or foundational elements such as earth, water, fire, wind, and sky. In Tantric practice, phonemes are not just phonemes, as they have some properties, energies, or specific sequences which embody meaning. A unique relation is established by the simple approximation of sound to mean the entity: *śiṃ* for *Śiva* or *pāṃ* for *Pārvatī*. Additionally, these phonemes are supposed to embody the properties of *Śiva* and *Pārvatī*. Metonymically, invoking the act of subduing a demon is supposed to magically empower the aspirant to subdue his enemies, or invoking the hypnotic properties of a goddess is meant to provide the deity’s hypnotic powers for the aspirant. Furthermore, there are two different subjective domains involved: that of aspirant and the deity. The underlying belief is that by means of invocation and incantation, the subject comes into contact with the deity and through this intimacy, the aspirant gains some of the

<sup>4</sup> This is one of the most common mantras in Hinduism in practice. The mantra invokes *Cāmuṇḍā*, a ferocious form of *Mātrkā* goddess who is identified with *Kālī*. In practice, the mantra corresponds to the goddess *Durgā*. The recitation of the *Devīmāhātmya*, in general during the *Navarātra* celebration, combines with the repetition of this mantra.

<sup>5</sup> These six goddesses are the residing deities of the six *cakras*: *mūlādhāra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna*, *maṇipura*, *anāhata*, *viśuddha*, and *ājñā*. These deities are then linked with the five elements and the mind. The details for the *Yoginīs* such as *Ḍākinī*, and their correlation with the *cakras* can be found in most of the classical Tantric texts that outline *Kuṇḍalinī* practice, such as *Rudrayāmala Tantra*, *Gandharva Tantra*, *Ṣaṭcakra Nirūpaṇa*. The combination of the initial phonemes for generation of *mantras* can be traced in texts such as *Śrīvidyārṇava Tantra*.

powers the deity embodies. Essentially, mantras function in this paradigm as the binding principles for a schematic transformation. Subjects undergo transformation of their self-image, and what they believe they are can dramatically alter based on their visualization. The body-image, which assists in constituting self-image, is also fluid, and subject's bodily experience can shift, shrink or extend, based on the meditative course. Tantric literature is full of anecdotes and even Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* outlines such transformation.

In general, common language and world events play as two domains. There is a specific reference assigned to words in common language. By exploiting this relationship, Tantric mantras create a separate system of connotation which is supposed to actualize the specific event by means of articulating common language. In this infused world of reality and fantasy, if the aspirant wishes his enemies be killed, his articulation of "*hana hana*" or "kill kill" is supposed to actualize the effect of killing his enemies. A dominant perspective on language as "referential" and not "transformative" along with a linguistic reality based on the power of signification and not of construction together maintain that our articulation of words does not transform reality and language is not constructive but rather representative. In the world of *mantras* however, language is constructive and not representative. *Mantric* efficacy therefore cannot be equated with the efficacy of words that convey meaning. The moment when one word becomes a mantra is at a time when it is supposed to "create" reality or transform the events, and not stand for something that is physically real. If we extrapolate the philosophy of language that grounds *mantric* speech, we come up with a wider scope for language wherein language plays a much bigger role in our everyday life, shaping and constituting what we take for granted. The interface between language and reality is paving its path in some contemporary works ([30], pp. 112–23).

### 2.3. Tantric Language III: Metaphoric Language

At the heart of Tantric language lies a belief in a metaphoric reality that rests on a subject's transformed experiential horizon occurring in his mystical states. Understanding the cognitive mechanism beneath this process allows us to contextualize the embodied experience that the Tantric literature endeavors to capture by the use of metaphors. Lackoff and Johnson ([16], p. 3) argue that our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphoric in nature. This broader perspective in metaphoric thinking aligns with the position that Tantric exegetes were acknowledging the metaphoric nature of our experiential domain and not projecting something outside of experience. To be precise, the very modes experience are embedded with metaphors as this is the way reality is first encountered. Rather than making metaphors an after-effect of symbolic activity, this assumption brings metaphoric thinking to the very heart of what it means to have a conscious experience.

Let us consider a small Tantric treatise, *Cidgaganacandrikā* (CGC) or *Moonlight in the Sky of Consciousness* [31]<sup>6</sup>. The very title of the text integrates the metaphoric terms of the sky and the moon to describe mystical experience. In this depiction, consciousness is suggested as a void, an empty space that is not conditioned with the presence of images. This indicates the higher order consciousness that is co-present with sensory experiences but not conditioned by these images. Image consciousness, along these lines, is somewhat subordinate to the higher state of consciousness that monitors the active mode of consciousness. Here the moon stands for light and that in turn for illumination, a reflexive role that consciousness plays in revealing itself. Beneath these suggestions lie the framework of Kālī, as the text is centered on the esoteric practice and philosophy of Kālī, the goddess who resides in the dark. A few more examples from the text demonstrate the integration of different domains and meaning:

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<sup>6</sup> I am using *Cidgaganacandrikā* for a source text for two different reasons. One, this text has remained in obscurity and is hardly studied in modern times. Two, this text is exemplary for its metaphoric application, integration of Krama and Mahārtha philosophies, and for its poetic qualities. Although the text is attributed to a purported Kālidāsa, the original name of the author seems to have been Śrīvatsa, about whom we know very little.

The text correlates the trunk of Gaṇeśa with the syllable *Om* (CGC 1) and relates the Sanskrit phonemes to the body of Gaṇeśa. The text compares transmigration in the world with wildfire, and identifies the text as the rejuvenating waters of the moon (CGC 3). This invokes the Hindu belief that the moon contains ambrosia, and to highlight its abundance, the author uses the term “*abdhī*” or ocean.

Some of the metaphors found in CGC that rest on cultural presuppositions include: consciousness is the eye that sees (CGC 4); the heart is a cave (CGC 5); eyes are the powers; consciousness is the ocean (CGC 7); rays are the net (CGC 10); the body of Kālī is the *sattva guṇa* (CGC 16); Kālī depicts *tamas* (CGC 19); the goddess is the full moon when manifesting her full form, and she is also the new moon that conceals the world within herself (CGC 21); Kālī consumes time (CGC 22); the goddess is pure consciousness (CGC 23); the goddess destroys limitations in the heart of the aspirant (CGC 25); having awareness of the goddess helps in destroying limited concepts (CGC 26).

Texts such as CGC, saturated with metaphoric expression, provide the field through which we can forge the relations among Tantric and literary language, ritual and scholastic domains, *mudrā* or select corporeal gestures and their wider connotation in ritual and philosophical domains, and above all, between visual and textual domains of Tantric language. For example, Tantric texts outline the gestures such as Karaṅkiṇī or Khecari. CGC 117–123 demonstrates the esoteric significance of such gestures that help us decompress the layers of meaning of otherwise opaque ritual constituents. The *maṇḍala* of Kālī, following the Krama system, is a blueprint for the cosmos, and Tantric metaphysics can be drawn based on establishing the correlates of the geometric parts and their counterpart philosophical categories. CGC verses 124–126, 140, 146–147 correspond to this concept. The correlation of the phonemes with the corporeal forms and geometric designs is vividly portrayed in CGC 148–151, 164. Moreover, the *maṇḍalic* expression correlates with the body of the aspirant and the text outlines a philosophical significance for such visualization (CGC 168–169).

As every single verse in the text is replete with metaphors, the objective here is not to list them all, but to suggest that the textual body cannot be dissociated from metaphors. Or, what is conveyed by the text is not exclusive of metaphors. Importantly, this text is not alone in the application of metaphors in constituting Tantric ritual and philosophical paradigms [32]. Studying these texts has been problematic, not just that they are metaphorically laden, but also because the mainstream contemporary scholarship sidelines these texts as sophistry and not essential to understanding the concepts and philosophy. This textual hermeneutics stems from the understanding that our Western epistemic framework is non-metaphoric, or that metaphors are subordinate to recognizing reality. As a consequence, texts like CGC that shape the practice of visualization are bracketed from a wider cultural discourse<sup>7</sup>.

#### 2.4. Tantric Language IV: The Visual Language of Deity Images

The mystical experience mapped through metaphors and shared in Tantric texts is only part of a wider Tantric discourse. Deity images and *maṇḍalas* play an equally central role as does speech in organizing Tantric concepts. Essential to this conversation is the recognition that the categories mapped in one language are remapped in another, and the visualization practice integrates all the domains, making visual language uniquely complex. Different cognitive domains and conceptual schemas are borrowed in developing the language of images and on most occasions, the metonymic and metaphoric process of conceptualization plays a crucial role in both the compression and decompression of meaning.

<sup>7</sup> While the text explored here is in Sanskrit, even the vernacular Tantric and Siddha literature is equally metaphoric. Exemplary studies in this direction to shed more light on the vernacular literature include Jackson [33,34], Bagchi [35–37], Guenther [38,39], Bailly [40], Dimock [41], and Urban [42].

First of all, the metonymic relations. Tantric images are complex with their graphic display of weapons and gestures, the number of heads, hands and seats, and the multiplicity of backgrounds in which they are placed (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Guhyakālī.

In one of the simplest images of Kālī, for example, she is portrayed as standing atop Śiva or a corpse, carrying a chopped head and a sword, and displaying the gestures of giving and protection. She is visualized as standing in the cremation grounds. There is a direct correspondence between the symbols used in Kālī imagery and the concepts to which they refer. Tantric texts decipher images as if texts, and use an image for visualization practices to bring to memory the central Tantric doctrines. All the aspects of visualization, the dark hue of Kālī, her nude body and widely spread hair, strident position sitting atop Śiva, for example, mean something if exploited as metonymic relations. When an image is visualized, the process compresses multiple layers of thought into a single image. These images are consciously preserved in memory, brought alive through mental projection, and are manipulated in the mental space in accordance with the system of visualization.

Any symbol can be used to signify multiple relations and complex, related concepts. The concept of “mirror networks” helps to decipher this process. A deity seated in a particular vehicle or a seat identifies her association with another deity or concept. Kālī sitting atop a corpse in the cremation ground depicts both her relation to death and time, and in essence, her transcendence to time. The chopped head or the sword that she carries indicates a specific role that she plays or a particular act that she accomplishes. Even the most basic image with two hands describes two different roles, and thus two concepts. Thus, the concept of mirror network has relevance to a fruitful exploration of Tantric images.

Fauconnier identifies the “single scope network” as the prototype for source-target metaphors. In the case of this network, rather than having a new blended structure, properties of one are imposed upon the other. Tantric visualization is rich in this aspect. One deity (A) assumes the role generally assigned to the other (B), and this is portrayed by A displaying the gestures that are specific to B. Lalitā is red in color; however, in her midnight meditation she assumes the role of Kālī and is depicted as dark and nude, thus embodying both deities. This is not an isolated example. In Tantric visualization,

deities such as Kubjikā or Siddhilakṣmī borrow nuances from other deities and philosophical systems, and in so doing, they integrate the properties unique to the other that is suggested.

There are three distinctive ways Tantric images are formed. The first occurs when borrowing aspects from an existing image and incorporating them into a single deity image. Durgā, for example, incorporates aspects from other deities, mostly the Dikpāla deities. Following the narrative found in the *Devīmāhātmya* (Chapter 2), all the major Hindu gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, and the guardian deities such as Indra, Agni, Yama, and Varuṇa provide their weapons to the goddess Durgā. A set of ten guardian deities, borrowed from the Vedic literature, constitutes the group of Dikpālas. The narrative of Durgā also highlights the gradual subordination and displacement of the preexisting divinities by the newly popularized forms. The Śākta resurgence vividly highlights this phenomenon and the narrative of Durgā is prototypical of this religious transformation.

A second strategy merges two or more domains, and Tantric deities are uniquely envisioned in a new form. Most of the Siddhilakṣmī variations display an integration of Lakṣmī and Kālī forms. We can find similar integration in the Kubjikā family as well, with the foundational Kubjikā being integrated with another deity image, such as Kālī. Third, multiple images are integrated into a single one, giving rise to the deities with multiple heads and hands. The prototype for this imagery comes from Śiva with five faces that integrates different deities of the Śaiva pantheon.

When the aspects from two different sources are merged in a single image, this follows a more complex process than the single-scope network. Double-scope blending borrows nuances from two different inputs and creates a unique emergent structure. Tantric images in particular and the deities in Hindu culture in general characteristically borrow aspects from pre-existing templates and create new images. Blended images of deities are commonplace even in Purāṇic Hinduism, with deities such as Harihara integrating two existing schemas of Hari = Viṣṇu and Hara = Śiva to create a single deity image of Harihara<sup>8</sup>. The androgynous image of Ardhanārīśvara displays the same pattern of borrowing inputs from the existing images of Śiva and Pārvatī. In this image, the right half is depicted as Śiva and the left as Śakti.

Most Tantric images represent what Fauconnier would call a “mega-blend” structure. From the basic Purāṇic divinities or Mātrkā and Bhairava images, aspects are borrowed and new images are made. This new emergent structure in turn is blended with other foundational images or newly emerged structures, leading to infinite variations. Every major Tantric deity comes with varied visualizations, thereby consolidating multiple systems by integrating nuances from the deities of other pantheons. Images, in this light, are flexible constructs that integrate different domains, with a consequent diversity in Tantric art and visualization. Deities in the pantheon of Kubjikā or Guhyakālī provide ample examples for such integrations. With deities having five, nine, or many more heads, each is identified with a specific deity from within the same pantheon or from different streams of Tantric practice. In these visualizations, multiple deities are blended, giving rise to new, and presumably more vigorous forms. This integration process is universal, and examples abound from all cultures around the globe.

## 2.5. Tantric Language V: The Visual Language of Maṇḍalas

The Tantras systematically replace common language with symbols, and these semiotic methods allow us to unravel the system of significance embedded in Tantric language. Although the process is not an historical one, the semiotic replacement in Tantric symbolism can be better understood through the following sequence:

Replace common language with metaphors. This process provides the framework to decompress the meanings of allegories and myths.

<sup>8</sup> The integrated form of Śiva and Viṣṇu identified as Harihara appears in Badami cave temples, built around the 6th Century.

Replace both common language and metaphoric language with phonetic inscriptions, seed syllables, such as *om*, *aiṃ*, *hrīṃ*, etc.

Replace all of the above with weapons, gestures, faces, vehicles, the background scenes, etc. (transform into visual language).

Replace all of the above with the geometric forms.

Following this, geometric forms, identified as *maṇḍalas*, are to replace common language. This thesis can easily mislead the individual and convince him that there is an inherent or intrinsic meaning in the geometric forms that are to be “expressed” or “deciphered” by use of common language. However, the point here is that the system of signs follows the basic universal traits of semiotics, and deciphering meaning makes sense only when the correspondence between formal language and symbols is recognized.

The replacement of common language with the geometric forms relies on ancient Vedic geometry expressed in the ritual domain (see Figure 3).

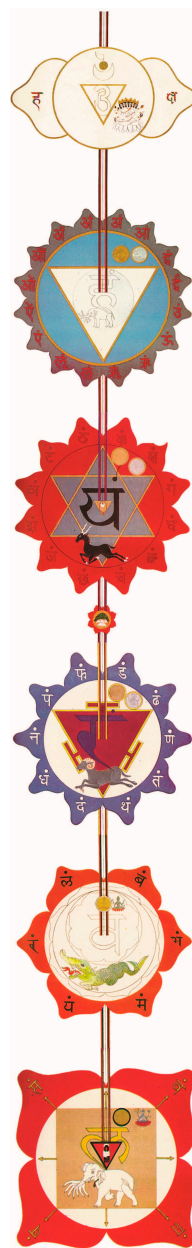


Figure 3. Six *Cakras*.

A square, down-facing triangle, upward triangle, hexagon, and a circle, for example, are used to correspond to earth, water, fire, air, and the sky. They are also supposed to stand for the phonemes of /la/, /va/, /ra/, /ya/, and /ha/. Rather than saying a “triangle” means “fire,” what makes sense here is to say that the triangle is used in Tantric meditation to “stand for” or evoke in memory the element of fire. Since geometry is the most universal form of expression, the objective here is to create a semiotic system that translates Tantric cosmology and philosophy to the most basic symbolism. This congruence is utilized during the course of visualization.

For instance, one of the most commonly recited Tantric mantras is the Tripurā mantra of fifteen phonemes: *ka-e-ī-la-hrīm-ha-sa-ka-ha-la-hrīm-sa-ka-la-hrīm*<sup>9</sup>. During the course of visualization, these phonemes are viewed as identical to the body of the goddess and her *maṇḍala*, Śrī Cakra (see Figure 4).

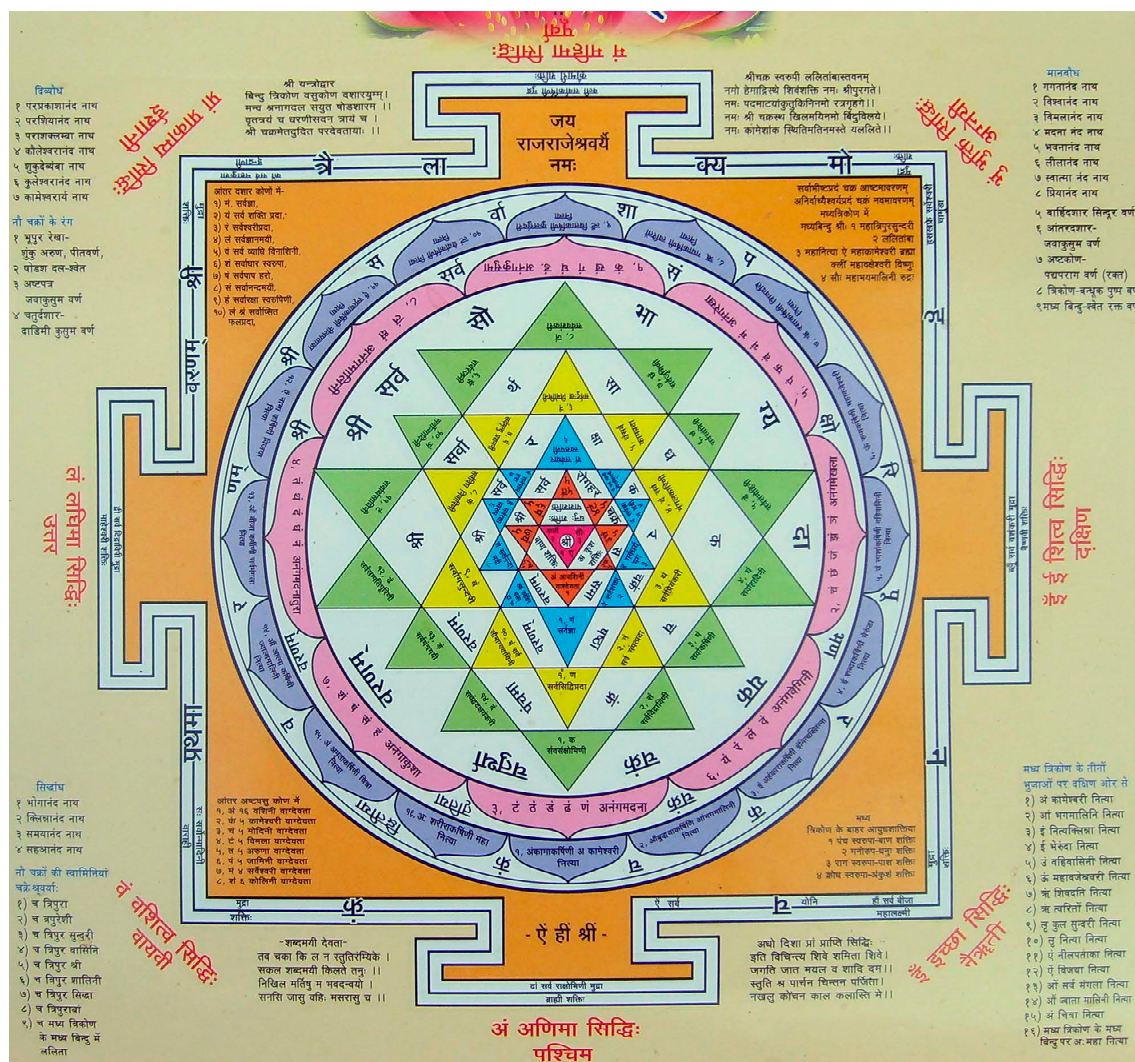


Figure 4. Śrī Cakra.

<sup>9</sup> Śrīvidyā mantras are identified in two prominent schools of Kādi and Hādi, with the initial letter of the mantra being K or H. There also appears to have existed a lineage of this mantra with an initial phoneme S, but the manuals for this tradition have been almost completely lost.

This is the *maṇḍala* comprised of nine intersecting triangles with eight and sixteen petals and the external gates. A general course of visualization of this *maṇḍala* in the practice of Tripurā follows:

Place the deity image in the heart of the aspirant. Visualize the body (both of the aspirant and the deity) as identical to the Śrī Cakra, and establish the correlation of the phonemes of the *mantra* within specific parts of the Cakra.

Visualize the deities associated with the specific groups of phonemes and find the correlation of these deities with the Cakra.

Attain awareness of the most subtle aspects of time successively fragmented into more and more subtle units and recollect the deity image, her *maṇḍala*, and the *mantra* in a single flash of consciousness<sup>10</sup>.

Cultivate an awareness of the sixfold categories identified as the “paths” (*adhvans*), that are viewed within the body of the practitioner. This process is called “installation” (*nyāsa*).

Establish an awareness of the oneness between the deity, preceptor, and aspirant.

In every cognitive mode, what is given is an object and its awareness, and both are witnessed by the transcendent mode of consciousness. Focus on this aspect of consciousness. Expand the duration of this experience by the recognition that consciousness is the essential thread that weaves together all the cognitive modes.

The objective of this visualization is to enhance the capacity of the attentive mind, to the extent that the mind can compress objects in a single flash of awareness, and then to compress and decompress layers of significance. Tantric practices are intentionally made complex, with additional new categories layered into practice, so that the mind concentrates on new deity images, their own *maṇḍalas* and mantras, with even more deities placed in the corners and center of the *maṇḍala* to further intensify the visualization process. What is also happening at the same time is a heightened meta-cognition that organizes the objects of cognition. Similar to lucid dreaming or arbitrarily created hypnogogic states, Tantric visualizations rely on the subjects spontaneously adding new values to the basic structures. A few added steps of visualization during the course of Śrī Cakra meditation is sufficient to demonstrate how added meaning is given to the basic structures. Following the text *Yoginīhṛdaya* [43], the recitation of the mantra of Tripurā parallels the mental articulation of a list of concepts:

Affirmation of the oneness of Śiva and Śakti. Both these principles are identified with the self-awareness that is both transcendent and immanent.

Recognizing the correlation between the *mantra* and the Śaivite categories (36 in total),

Establishing the oneness of the self and the supreme divinity (Tripurā in this context),

Realizing the oneness of the *mantra* and Śrī Cakra,

Identification of the subject consciousness with transcendental consciousness, and

Identification of the *mantra* and *kuṇḍalinī*, the serpentine force representing the *prāṇic* energy. Each individual, following Tantras, embodies the totality of the cosmic forces in its dormant form. *Kuṇḍalinī* represents this energy. This step of practice identifies speech or *mantra* with the cosmic energy.

*Maṇḍalas*, in this light, stand in Tantric visualization as the final product of the cognitive process of compression that starts with polysemy. Compression allows the viewer to bring the added value or meaning within the focal point. This need reflects the relationship between “real space” and “mental space,” as even in mental space, there is a basic limit to what can be compressed or “enclosed”.

<sup>10</sup> I am referring to the meditative practice outlined in the *Yoginīhṛdaya*, particularly the section on *mantra*, with regard to attention on aspects of time.

This “mental map” provides the space similar to the “computer space” which does not reflect the physical space.

### 3. Analysis and Conclusions

The cognitive mechanisms addressed above in the formation of Tantric symbolism and specifically Tantric language illustrate how the system of reference is established in *mantras* in particular and in other forms of symbolic expression. This sophisticated system of significance also reveals that deciphering meaning in Tantras differs from that utilized in common language where a linear reference system of signs, with an identification of the signifier and the signified, can suffice. However, it is counterintuitive to assume that *mantras* have no meaning. In contrast, even these visual forms of expression have distinctive significance and their inherent meaning is assigned by the system of reference.

Taking a cue from Tantric visual language in particular and *mantra* language in general, the symbolic expression that rests on pre-existing elemental language should be considered a form of meta-language. In all contexts of metonymy, metaphor, or cognitive blending, Tantric symbolic expression has relied on some basic form of language. In several contexts, pre-existing texts or narratives that are codified through Tantric symbols, both in speech and visual forms are decompressed or analyzed when in the process of visualization or “practice”. In each of the early instances where meaning is derived, there is reliance on a pre-existing “text” or language to which the Tantric symbols refer. For instance,

- Based on the internal system of signs, the phonemes /la/ or /va/ or /ha/ refer to earth, water, or the sky.
- Based on a chain reference system, fire stands for heat and that stands for the phoneme /ra/.
- Based on metonymic reference, eyes stand for seeing, hands for action, snakes for poison, and the tongue for tasting.
- Based on metaphoric reference, moonlight stand for liberating wisdom as both possess soothing properties.
- Based on conceptual integration, deity images with multiple heads refer to the base images which in turn have their own frame of reference.

In essence, there is a distinction between common language and Tantric language. This distinction lies in the Tantras’ use of base language to encode its symbols and a process of deciphering which is traditionally used in both the process of extracting the mantras (*mantroddhāra*) from the texts and in the practice of visualization that brings to mind the complex imagery incorporated during the process of compression or in the process of creating the symbols.

Any Tantric text uses two different types of languages. There are narratives, cosmologies and philosophies that are intelligible in plain language. However, the same language is then used to encode and decipher *mantric* language, the deity image, or a *maṇḍala*. What *mantra*, *maṇḍala*, or the deity image stand for is what has been described in plain language at length. The function of this second-order language is to compress a wide array of symbols and meanings within a single image or concept so that the subject visualizing or meditating upon the image can articulate in the mind the underlying philosophies and cosmologies. In all occasions, basic units with meaning are integrated in the process of creating the sophisticated practice of visualization. The device of conceptual blending allows us to analyze the intricate cognitive mechanisms behind this process.

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